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ABSTRACT

A case study of the practices of a white teacher working in an urban elementary school with a large majority of African American students shows the problems caused by detached and unreflective teaching practice. The study emerges from a joint ethnographic research and classroom-based educational project at the school. The teacher worked with university-affiliated members of a college-school collaboration. A person-in-context conceptual frame was used to construct a contextualized and data-driven understanding of the teacher's racial identity in the school context. The teacher did not recognize, confront, and take responsibility for the significance of race and racism in his classroom. He focused on supposedly nonracial factors, such as parenting, economics, and environmental influences, as the key issues challenging his students. His language about students was marked by low expectations and inattentiveness to student strengths. Neither his disciplinary nor pedagogical practices were effective. This teacher participated in the cultural practices of his school and classroom in a way that produces and maintains separateness from, and oblivion and indifference to, race in a highly racialized context. (Contains eight references.) (SLD)

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Unreflective detachment as a contextualized racial identity: A case study of cultural practices of a White teacher in an African-American elementary school

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Unreflective detachment as a contextualized racial identity:

A case study of cultural practices of a White teacher in an African-American elementary school

> ***Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable. And education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, not to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world. (Arendt, 1961, p. 196)***

Introduction

Overview

Arnold Hannah is the pseudonym I will use to refer to the White male veteran teacher whose classroom practices provide the basis for this case study. The pseudonym is an ironic reference to Hannah Arendt's discussion of education presented in her essay, "The Crisis in Education" (1961). She argues that educators bear the responsibility for introducing children to the socio-political realities of their world in such a way that cultivates the possibility of belonging and innovation. She claims:

> ...educators here stand in relation to the young as representatives of a world for which they must assume responsibility although they themselves did not make it, and even though they may, secretly or openly, wish it were other than it is. ...Vis-a-vis the child it is as though he [*sic*] were a representative of all adult inhabitants, pointing out the details and saying to the child: This is our world. (p. 189)

Invoking Arendt as a namesake is ironic because, through this paper, I will argue that Arnold Hannah's cultural practices in the classroom, and his talk about himself as an educator,

make the case for a teacher characterized not by love and responsibility, but by unreflective detachment. Unreflective detachment captures Hannah's indifference to and denial of: 1) the meanings and significances of race in his life, 2) his pedagogical responsibilities as an educator, and 3) connection to the lives of his students and their families. An exception to his detached stance is evident in his concern about and commitment to behavior management. Notably, the limited effectiveness of the multiple discipline strategies he employs reinforces Hannah's perception of his students' as exceptionally aggressive and lacking in self-control.

Hannah is not uniquely problematic, but representative, an exemplar of issues, experiences, and dilemmas that may arise, to varying degrees, among White teachers working in settings with primarily African-American students. Further, I am not interested in characterizing Hannah's teaching practices per se, but to make the case that his unreflective detachment is a racial identity embodied by his practices as a White teacher in this particular educational context. I will argue that his denial of race and racism, considered in conjunction with other teaching practices, "is part of the construction of an identity" (Miller and Goodnow, 1995, p. 9), specifically a racial identity.

The historic and contemporary salience of race, literally and symbolically, at Lincoln Elementary School,[1] where Hannah has taught for ten years, contrasts sharply with his denial of the significance of race in his own life, and the lives of his students and their families. Unreflective detachment is a racial identity in this context.

Situating the Research

The following case study emerges from a joint ethnographic research and classroom-based educational project at Lincoln Elementary School. The research and classroom activities are a

[1] The name of the school, in addition to the name of the teacher, have been changed.

component of a public school-community-university collaboration cultivated over a five-year period. The collaboration was initiated under a new principal (who left the following year) seeking community partnerships as a means of garnering resources for the school. Members of the Clinical-Community Division of the Psychology Department at a local public university began to work with school staff and community members to develop projects to respond to needs and interests identified by individuals at the school and in the community (Kloos, et al., 1997).

Mr. Hannah has been working with university-affiliated members of the collaboration for the past four years. For three years, his students participated in a mentoring program designed to facilitate transition to middle school. The program ended following the 1997-98 school year. Hannah was open to continuing his relationship with the collaboration in another form. I was developing a classroom-based project, the Life Stories Project (LSP), to provide opportunities for elementary students to creatively document and share life stories as part of their schooling experience. Hannah was positive about the opportunities LSP would give his students to work creatively, as well as to develop mentoring relationships with undergraduates who would be collaborating on the project.

Situating the Setting

Lincoln Elementary School is located in a historically African-American community within a small, predominantly White, mid-western city. The families living in the community are primarily working class and lower-income families. Lincoln is the only majority African-American school in the district. Although most of the teachers are White women, the school has more African-Americans on staff than any other district school. Staff often refer to Lincoln as "the step-child of the district" because of it's poor academic performance in relation to other district schools, and the students' reputation as "difficult" to teach and manage.

Currently, Lincoln is undergoing numerous significant transformations. In January 1998, an African-American woman, community resident, and veteran teacher at the school, was named principal following five years of short-term principalships. In August 1998, the school moved to a newly-constructed building. Thirdly, coordinated advocacy by the current school principal and members of the school-community-university collaboration resulted in Lincoln's participation in a foundation-funded school reform effort. It is the only elementary school in the district participating in this reform project. Additionally, in response to a race-based civil rights complaint, the district is currently mandated to make numerous policy and procedure changes to remedy a series of documented racial inequities in the educational and disciplinary treatment of African-American students in the district. The plan initiated a shift from district-directed school assignment requiring the disproportionate busing of African-American students, to family-directed school choice, constrained by a requirement that the student body of each public school reflect the district's overall racial balance.

Lincoln's position as the district's only school with a majority African-American student population—precisely the students and community the lawsuit intends to represent—and the school's image as the district's most troubled, grants Lincoln unique and highlighted status in the district's current educational and social reform. In the context of this paper exploring racial identity, this status is meaningful because it marks both the historic and current attention to and salience of race at Lincoln as a community and educational setting.

Methods

Conceptualization: Practice as Identity, Identity as Practice

Utilizing ethnographic research of cultural practices as a methodology to study racial identity emerges from a transactional conceptualization of identity as a situated and relational construct. Identity as an internal psychological construct locates the individual as a unit of analysis independent of context. Alternatively, transactionalist perspectives conceptualize individual and context as "aspects of a system that ... coexist and jointly define one another and contribute to the meaning and nature of a holistic event" (Altman & Rogoff, 1991, p. 24). Identity, within this framework, requires a research methodology based on a unit of analysis allowing attention to person-in-context.

Ethnographic research of the cultural practices of a setting utilizes "person-participating-in-a-practice" as the unit of analysis (Miller and Goodnow, 1995, p. 8). Considering identity from a person-in-context perspective, the research focus eschews seeking the relationship *between* the individual's participation in cultural practices and their identity; participation and identity are not separable. The goal is to understand participation-in-the-practices of a setting *as* identity. A transactional conceptualization of identity can be encapsulated as: identity as practice, practice as identity. This aphorism is not meant to suggest that identity is only practice, and practices are only identity, but to establish practices and identity as mutually constitutive.

Cultural practices can be understood as the routine, normative rituals of a setting. Miller and Goodnow define cultural practices as:

> ...actions that are engaged in by many or most members of a cultural group and that carry with them normative expectations about how things should be done (Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition, 1983). Cultural practices are not neutral; they come packaged with values about what is natural, mature, morally right, or aesthetically pleasing. These, then, are

> actions that may easily *become part of a group's identity*. As people learn the practice—its essential and optional features—they also develop values and a sense of belonging and identity within the community (Holland and Valsiner, 1988; Lave and Wenger, 1991) ...
>
> In sum, practices are actions that are repeated, shared with others in a social group, and invested with normative expectations and with meanings or significances that go beyond the immediate goals of the action. (p. 6-7, italics added)

Within a school setting, examples of cultural practices include the seating arrangement of the students (rows, pods), the process by which students are permitted to speak (hand raising, calling out, facilitating discussion), teachers' interactions with students' families, and colleagues' talk about their students, or about race.

Of particular relevance for this paper, Miller and Goodnow argue that an individual's participation in the cultural practices of a setting "is part of the construction of an identity or a person" (p. 9).

Practice Methodology

Utilizing a person-in-context conceptual framework, a contextualized and data-driven understanding of Hannah's racial identity in the context of Lincoln School emerges. Extended ethnographic data collection, and formal and informal interviews, provide the basis for interpretation of cultural practices through which Hannah confronts race and racism at Lincoln. These situated cultural practices include:

- talk about himself as a raced person and White teacher at Lincoln

- talk about students, their parents and community
- interaction with his students and families
- pedagogical practices
    - content
    - methods
    - classroom organization (temporal, spatial, and aesthetic)
- discipline and behavior management practices

Identification of and attention to these forms of speech and behavior as meaningful cultural practices of this setting emerges from a first review, synthesis, and analysis of ethnographic data gathered over a period of six months. Data include classroom observations and informal discussions documented through field notes, collected artifacts, and two formal interviews.

I met Hannah during a series of observations in his 5th grade classroom in the Spring of 1998, done as part of development of this research. Since the beginning of the 1998-99 school year, I have spent two mornings a week in Hannah's 4th grade classroom. One morning each week I observe and interact with the members of the class as they go through their regular schedule. Every Friday morning, myself and a group of four undergraduates[2] from a nearby public university, work with the students on the Life Stories Project. In addition to the time spent in the classroom, I have been getting to know members of the school community (teaching and administrative staff, and families) by spending time at the school regularly, and participating in the classroom's Open House and parent-teacher conferences.

[2] The undergraduate participants are enrolled in a full-year Community Projects course, an upper-level practicum in the Psychology Department.

Data Gathered

Personal and Teaching History

Mr. Hannah was born in the early 1950's in a mid-western town of approximately 7,500 people. There were about "a half dozen black families" in the town. He was one of seven kids in a family in which "there was never enough money to go around," and thus began to work before age 16. Hannah began his college career in 1970 at a public university. Initially, he studied political science, which he neither enjoyed, nor took seriously. He dropped out after two years. He worked for the university town's Department of Public Works for four years.

In 1975, he married a woman, a teacher, who inspired him to become a teacher. He returned to school in 1978 to complete a degree in education. During this time he had two daughters and worked part-time to contribute to supporting his family. After receiving his degree in 1980, he was unable to get a job as a teacher due to a "teacher glut" in the town. He worked as a local truck driver for two years, followed by four years holding various jobs at a power plant being constructed in the vicinity. He was laid off in 1986. In 1983, motivated by his wife, he and his family moved to the city where they continue to live.

Following the layoff, Hannah, in his mid-thirties, felt he "needed a career." He had always loved kids, and his wife encouraged him to pursue teaching. He began to substitute teach in the local district in 1986, while also coaching girls' basketball, and working a variety of odd jobs "to make ends meet."

In 1989, he was hired by the African-American male principal of Lincoln Elementary School to teach fourth grade. After teaching fourth grade for one year, he spent the following eight years teaching 5th grade. This academic year, due to a decision by the newest principal, he

returned to teaching fourth grade. Hannah is currently taking graduate-level education courses at a local public university to enable him to become a school administrator.

Talk about Racial Identity

Hannah's responses to questions about his racial identity reveal a lack of consciousness about being a raced person.[3] Hannah hasn't "thought a whole lot" about what it means to him to be White. He finds questions about his White identity to be "real hard questions for me to answer in the specific." His experience of himself as White is something he has "never put feelings on before right now."

Responses to reformulated follow-up questions asking Hannah to express what being White means to him, and how he thinks about it, led him to speak comparatively about his relationships with Whites and African-Americans. Since moving in 1983, he has lived in the same city, in predominantly White neighborhoods. Currently, he reports that no African-American families live within a two-block radius of his home. While he has collegial relationships with African-Americans and members of other ethnic groups through his work at Lincoln, his primary relationships outside of his family emerge from his activities outside of work, bowling and golfing. African-Americans participate in his sports leagues, but his teams are exclusively White.

Inquiry into his awareness, understanding, and experience of his White identity are responded to as implicit questions about his racism: "I don't think a whole lot about being White, I just don't look at it like that." Asked to clarify the "it" in that sentence, Hannah responds, "Um, when I walk in anywhere, I never think I'm white, I'm better than you." He used the phrase

[3] Hannah's lack of consciousness about himself as a raced person reflects current research on whiteness as a racial identity, specifically Alice McIntyre's (1997) work on racial identity with White teachers. Contextualizing Hannah's words within the literature on White identity suggests that he is not unique, but offers an exemplar of a White teacher in a predominantly White school district (students and staff) and city, working in a school with a majority of White teachers and African-American students.

"white, black, in-between" six times during ninety minutes of talk to indicate, at various junctures in conversation, that race is irrelevant to his assessment of children, families, behavior, and teaching. Hannah claims to "look beyond difference to the person."

Ironically, as the following quote indicates, although Hannah claims race to be a non-issue, he asserts that a person with racist attitudes would be unable to work at Lincoln.

> So I feel comfortable working with all these minority kids, and I've told them more than once, more than a few times each year that, if I had a problem with a, a prejudice against any kind of black kid, or minority, or Asian, or A... Indian, or whatever, it'd be real hard to come into this classroom each day. 'Cause... these kids can sense it, I won't say they're like a dog, but, I mean when they can smell fear or whatever, but these kids know if you have a problem with their skin color. If you do, I don't see how you can function here. You know, like I said, it all depends on parenting to a degree, and where they're coming from.

Despite the high salience of race in the context of Lincoln School, Hannah refuses to recognize, confront, and take responsibility for the significance of race and racism in his classroom. Instead, he focuses on supposedly non-raced factors—parenting, economics, and environmental influences—as the key issues challenging the students, and thus his teaching efforts. Dogged denial of race as an issue relevant to his teaching practice is a key aspect of Hannah's racial identity. Thus, unreflective detachment from his own daily experiences of and with race—lack of attention to and thought about race as salient to his own life, the lives of his students, their families, and the community and institution in which he has worked for ten years—exemplifies Hannah's racial identity as a White teacher at Lincoln.

Cultural Practices of Teaching

Characterizing students. Over the course of the 1998-99 school year, there have been between fifteen and eighteen students in Hannah's fourth grade classroom. He consistently describes the class as a "little boy's club" because two-thirds of the students are male. Of the fourteen boys who have been in the class during the year, eleven are African-American and three are White. Five girls have been in the class over the course of the year; three are African-American, two are White.

Hannah's reference to his "little boy's club" captures his perception that the male students, and to a large extent the females as well, are "immature," "unfocused," and poor in "self-control," "self-monitoring," and "responsibility." Behavior, therefore, is his biggest problem with his students. They "can't handle" walking down the hall or being in free movement spaces. He is "leery to take some of these kids out" on field trips. After a trip to an art museum, he observed that he had "learned his lesson" that some of "these kids can't appreciate" that kind of experience.

Hannah utilizes the language quoted above both with students, and in conversations with school staff, observers, and parents. Hearing Hannah complement a student or articulate a positive expectation, either to the child, parents, or colleagues, is atypical. More normative are comments expressing surprise about an excelling student made to a father during a parent-teacher conference in which the child and myself were present. The child received the best overall report card in the class. Hannah repeated three times that he was surprised that the student had received such high marks.

Situations in which individual student behavior determines participation in an event (a class party or field trip) provoke him to repeatedly claim: "it doesn't look good for a lot of you." Hannah's language is marked by low expectations, inattention to student strengths, and bemused

tolerance indexing the unspoken: "What am I supposed to do with these unruly and underachieving children (given their families and community)?"

He is explicit, comfortable, and confident in his claims that the students at Lincoln are different in terms of behavior and skills than students at all other district schools. He commonly describes his students as "standing out" at other schools, whereas they "blend in" at Lincoln. Despite this color-based imagery, Hannah insists that race is not relevant to the students' behavior and skill problems, and blames "poverty", "low SES", "parenting," and "hazardous environments."

The school does serve a lower-income community. Among Hannah's students, all but one qualify to receive school lunches. In Hannah's words, Lincoln is:

> ...always looked on as the minority school up on the North End...Our figures are closer to 75% now...and that's not the problem, it's the socioeconomic level that it's 90%, that's what I'm...all, you can...socioeconomic. When you're looking at 90%, I got one kid who brings in a sac lunch on reduced. When you look down your roster and I have nobody paying for lunch. They're all low...with the money. That's where I see the biggest problem here....it's across the board with white, black, and in-between, they just don't have a lot of money.

Hannah's characterizations of his students' lives seem more congruent with stereotypical images of the urban "underclass": "blacks" and "minorities" living in conditions of extreme poverty, violence, moral bankruptcy, and generalized misery, than with the actual lived social and economic conditions in the neighborhoods surrounding the school. His perspective suggests the students, their families, and the school community belong to another culture, a culture of poverty,

which Hannah is neither a part of, not responsible for. Framing his students' lives as so extreme and different from his own facilitates his own sense of separateness. Unquestioning acceptance and perpetuation of this separateness characterizes his unreflective detachment from his students' lives, their racialized experiences, as well as his own.

Behavior management strategies. The time and effort Hannah spends responding to student behavior verbally and through disciplinary action, as well as developing and maintaining systems to manage and modify behavior, suggest that student behavior is his primary teaching concern. He implements numerous behavior management systems in the classroom. One system is based on the intermittent re-arrangement of the desks and chairs, supplemented by frequent shifts in placement of individual students. Students "making poor choices" (not raising their hands, being rude to Hannah or peers) or who "can't handle" their current spot (distracting or provoking neighbors) are moved to a desk in a different row, or to one of five desks that are isolated along the walls or in corners.

With the exception of a short period when the student desks were arranged in pods, the desks have been in rows. Students in the same row form teams. Team behavior earns points towards a reward of a pizza lunch for the team with the most points at the end of a month. These teams have no pedagogical purpose; they are used solely within a disciplinary context. A point tally is kept on the right-hand corner of the blackboard in the front of the room. Hannah, and other Lincoln teachers who work in his classroom, give or take points based on student compliance (following directions, keeping quiet, and generally "doing the right thing"). In addition to the team tally, often there are one or two lists of individual students' names on the left side of the board. These are lists of students who have broken rules and are in danger of losing recess, being sent to detention, or getting moved to an isolated spot. The number of checks next

to a name indicates both how close a student is to a disciplinary action, as well as what the student must do to redeem him or herself.

The discipline system evolves. A recent incarnation involves the following set of written rules: 1) Please raise your hand, and wait to be called on, and stand up to answer; 2) Please keep hands, feet, and objects to yourself; 3) Please come prepared for class; 4) Please line up quietly when told; and 5) Please cooperate in the classroom. Laminated copies of the rules are taped to most students' desks. On the list on the board, alongside a student name, is the number of the rule that was broken. In order to get their names removed from the board, students write the rule five times for every check next to her or his name.

The classroom, however, is not characterized by order, discipline, or direction. Ignoring, resisting, feigning acceptance, and discrete mocking of Hannah's directions and discipline efforts are as frequent as visible recognition and acceptance of his legitimate authority. Thus, despite the significant amount of both time and effort that Hannah appears to be putting into managing the class, students continue to behave in ways that maintain his perceptions and beliefs. In the case of his discipline efforts, Hannah's practices produce results reinforcing his beliefs about the behavior of African-American children, and justifying the need to focus his classroom time and effort on behavior.

Pedagogical practices. In addition to using the board to maintain numerous discipline systems, academic assignments are listed on the board. Consistently, the assignment list is written in smaller handwriting than the discipline lists. The agenda includes a list of text book page numbers and worksheet numbers of language arts assignments, which include spelling, handwriting, vocabulary, and writing.

Language arts occupies the first two hours of the school day, 8:00 am to 10:00 am. These two hours are loosely structured and monitored. Hannah commonly leads the class through exercises, although the students are also frequently left to manage their own time. Regardless, students engage in alternative activities (drawing, wandering, 'spacing out', talking to peers, playing with cars, key chains, and sports paraphernalia), claiming they have nothing to do because their assignments are complete. Despite Hannah's explicit statements of doubt that their work is complete, students are often neither challenged to show their work, nor to engage in alternative activities.

When I asked if there is a time during the school day when it would be least disruptive to pull students out of class to work one-on-one with the undergraduates on projects, or to do interviews with me, Hannah responded that any time between 8:00 am and 10:00 am any day of the week would be fine. Highly structured lessons, unwillingness to cede class time, and concern about disrupting the class' and individual student's learning, are not in and of themselves hallmarks of engaged and committed teachers. In Hannah's case, however, his absolute flexibility lends support to an interpretation of indifference and lack of mission towards his students' need and desire for education.

The spelling, handwriting, and vocabulary assignments are exclusively text-book and worksheet based. The students' task involves choosing the correct word from a pre-determined list to fill in the blank in a pre-written sentence. Recently, Hannah instituted a daily writing assignment in which the students write a topic sentence and three supporting sentences in response to a question he develops and writes on the board. Examples of the prompt questions include: what is your favorite room in your house, what does growing up mean to you, describe the snowstorm, what does Black History Month mean to you, and describe returning to school

the Monday after vacation. In reviewing the paragraphs, he looks for aspects of form (number of sentences, indentation, capital letters), not content or spelling.

Like much of the language arts and math work the students produce, the paragraphs become part of characteristic piles—unmarked work, school-related documents, and books—covering surfaces throughout the classroom. The items in one pile, found on a large U-shaped desk used for group work, included: two large hard-back dictionaries, 101 Dinosaur Jokes, two unmarked essays by students entitled "How to get along with peers," unmarked completed worksheets, a student's unmarked completed handwriting worksheet with reading questions written in pencil on the back, a student's notebook, unmarked snowstorm paragraphs, blank handwriting worksheets, blank vocabulary worksheets, paragraphs entitled, "The Monday I came back to school," the state's History Unit Final Test Review, a math book, Spiders Spin Webs, overdue book notices from the school library, Who Were the First North Americans, If You Traveled on the Underground Railroad, 101 Hopelessly Hilarious Jokes, and a number of unmarked student spelling tests. Like items were not grouped within the pile, but encountered throughout. Hannah acknowledges his classroom is unorganized and messy, yet the classroom remains spatially, and temporally, chaotic and unstructured.

As with his relationships to his students and to his own racial identity, Hannah's pedagogy can be characterized by unreflective detachment, evidenced by a lack of: pedagogical structure and mission, attention to student work, and effort in lesson planning and implementation. While generating ideas for the paragraphs requires creativity on Hannah's part, the remainder of the language arts curriculum involves following chapters in texts and a numbered worksheet series. I offer this interpretation not for the purposes of critiquing his pedagogical practice, but as a contrast to the relative effort, time, and creativity he puts into behavior management practices.

His engagement and interest in the educational aspects of teaching contrast with a comparative commitment and attention to practices of behavior management. His practices suggest accepting greater responsibility for teaching appropriate behavior than education on basic skills, more advanced cognitive skills, or content-based learning.

Discussion

Unreflective Detachment as a Racial Identity

As I noted in the Introduction, this paper aims not solely to present the case that unreflective detachment characterizes Hannah's participation in the cultural practices of a particular raced context, but to argue for unreflective detachment as a racial identity. This argument rests on analysis and interpretation of Hannah's speech and behavior conceptualized as a person-participating-in-a-practice within a specified context. Lincoln Elementary School represents a spatial and symbolic context with a unique social and political history.

Lincoln is the district's, as well as the distal and local community's, "black school" and "bad school." To remain oblivious to the presence and significance of race and racism in the setting of the school as an institution, and as a White male classroom teacher of primarily African-American students, is not a neutral position, but a raced position. It is, I would argue, a racial identity. Specifically, racial identity conceptualized as the unreflective detachment of a White teacher from race as a salient issue in his life, from his responsibilities as an educator of African-American students, and from the lives of those students.

Hannah's racial identity, conceptualized in practice terms, is not only not neutral, but also not passive. His racial identity is productive. He is participating in the cultural practices of his school and classroom in such a way that produces and maintains a complex and striking contradiction: separateness from, and oblivion and indifference to, race in a highly racialized

context. Not "noticing" his own whiteness, not noting or caring if his students are "white, black, or in-between," stands in contrast to Arendt's conception of educators' responsibility to introduce children to the socio-political realities of their world.

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